

University of Groningen

Introduction

Hoogvliet, Margriet

Published in:
Relief

DOI:
[10.18352/relief.756](https://doi.org/10.18352/relief.756)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2012

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hoogvliet, M. (2012). Introduction: French films d'histoire: Contesting France's National Memory. *Relief*, 6(1), 3 - 6. <https://doi.org/10.18352/relief.756>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

INTRODUCTION :

French *films d'histoire*: Contesting France's National Memory.

RELIEF 6 (1), 2012 – ISSN: 1873-5045. P 3-6

<http://www.revue-relief.org>

URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-1-113706

Igitur publishing

© The author keeps the copyright of this article

Modern films about the past, called in French *films d'histoire*, or *fictions patrimoniales* (Beylot and Moine), in English “historical film”, or “heritage film”, easily evoke the idea of women in Marie-Antoinette dresses being romantically involved with “men in tights” against a background of “corsets, cleavage and country houses” in “‘steamy’ television series (the costumes! the sets! the sex scenes!)” (Higson, 186-187). But, in fact, almost all great film directors have made at least one film situated in the past; in some cases a recent past that most of the viewers have witnessed themselves; in other cases a distant past that is more alien to a modern audience. These films do not only raise questions about the possibility or impossibility of representing the past in a reliable manner, but also about what they have to say about the present. The contributions to this issue of *Relief* about films evoking France's past all ask questions how they can be read as a comment on France's national memory, and why this was judged necessary by the film directors.

Besides being sometimes popular successes, films that represent events from the past have been analysed and debated in a growing stream of scholarly publications, starting as early as 1957 by Roland Barthes and Marc Ferro (1977). Historical films are in many respects paradoxical: for us, humans, time is an irreversible process and past events cannot be revived any more, but yet, when watching a film about the past we are being put in the position of an eye-witness (Moss, 12) assisting to historical events as if they were happening in the present and in our presence: “past and present can be experienced as one and the same” (Higson, 178). Moreover, cinema has an “unequalled ability to re-create the past in a sensual, mimetic form” (Burgoyne, 1). This eye-witness effect, or reality effect, is probably one of the greatest attractions of these films, but also the main reason why

many historians have expressed their disapproval of some film director's free adaptation and manipulation of the historical data in the service of narrative, entertainment, commercial success, or even straightforward propaganda (Rosenstone, Davis, 121-136). Moreover, films and documentaries are rapidly developing towards a blurring of the boundaries of fact and fiction that is alarming for many historians: films often make use of historical footage suggesting that fictional events really happened, and documentaries increasingly include re-enacted or even fictional elements, thus becoming "docufiction". In a time where many people derive their historical knowledge uniquely from films, television, games, and mass culture (Moss, Williams, Beck), this is, indeed, a point of concern.

On the other hand, the opposition between the fiction of film and the facts of academic history writing is not as sharply demarcated as often suggested. Hayden White has pointed at the narrative structures that tacitly shape historical studies (1987) and in the end for White there is no fundamental opposition between a fictional historical film and a historical discourse that claims to report the truth: "Every written history is a product of processes of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and qualification exactly like those used in the production of a filmed representation. It is only the medium that differs, not the way in which the messages are produced" (1988, 1194). Other historians who have commented upon the perceived opposition between the fiction of historical film and truth in historical texts include Marcia Landy who pointed at the ambiguities of historical writing (2001, 1-7) and Roger Chartier who suggests that it is a contract between the viewer and the film director or author, resulting from a process of negotiation, that determines if we read the work as fact or fiction.

In fact, the past in historical films is never simply the past, as Pam Cook has observed: "they look backwards and forwards at the same time, creating a heterogeneous world that we enter and leave like travellers, in a constant movement of exile and return" (73). According to Robert Burgoyne "by reenacting the past in the present, the historical film brings the past into dialogue with the present" (11). Because of this juxtaposition of the old and the new, historical films give "the powerful sense that what is being rendered on-screen is not an imaginative world, but a once-existing world that is being reinscribed in an original way" (11). So, even if historical films evoke events from the past, their agency mainly affects the present, by drawing "parallels between past and present, in terms of religious extremism and intolerance, where the parallel, the lesson to be drawn is of more importance than adhering to the historical record" (Higson, 188) and "history is often evoked as a judgement on present events" (Landy 1991, 55). Belén Vidal has recently suggested that historical films "relate to the constitution of a collective cultural memory" (2). Seen from this perspective, historical films are not so much about the question of fact or fiction, but they are rather contributing to the process of memory-making, thus shaping collective identities in the present

(Rigney, 17-21). In this spirit, Vidal emphasises that it is important to study “the ways in which national cinemas turn to the past at different moments in their histories in search of their own foundational myths” (3, Chapman, 6-7, Burgoyne 19).

Early historical films often evoked the glorious past in order to strengthen the national identity (Bourget, 35-53), or they offered a possibility to escape from a problematic present in the form of a nostalgic look back to the certainties and the visual splendour of the national past (Vidal, 9). Since the 1920s historical films have evolved from epic films with impressive mass scenes to films showing 'micro-histories' of a few individuals against the background of the great events of history. But since the 1970s and 1980s a more critical attitude towards the collective memory can be detected, because from that moment onwards European film makers started to challenge their elders' silence about the Nazi past (Landy 2001, 9, Chapman, 321) and started to “move away from the consensual national narratives that arose since World War II towards the reconfiguration of the myths of national identity in what could be called [...] the 'anti-national' heritage film” (Vidal, 68).

This critical attitude towards the national memory in historical films is especially true for France, where *films d'histoire* had a darker tone from the onset (Beylot and Moine, 22) and the French *cinéma d'auteur* is often an expression of “oppositional reflections on national identity” (Vidal, 59). Another political aspect of French *films d'histoire* is that they are intended to incarnate the specific values of French cultural heritage as a defence against American cultural imperialism (Vidal, 55-59, Beylot and Moine, 23). However, together with processes of globalisation and the increasingly international character of film production, even in France the historical film has entered a post-national stage where it has to appeal to international audiences (Vidal 70-78) and at the same time these developments have opened the possibility for film directors outside France to appropriate the history of France and to explore its cinematographic possibilities and its political potential.

According to Peter Burke historical films have an important function in modern society because they “help their contemporaries to interpret events they have all lived through” (Burke, 164-168). To this can be added that these films also prevent history from becoming obsolete by a continuous process of re-actualisation, and they have an important role in the healing of repressed traumatic or shameful episodes from the past. The contributions to this issue of Relief all address one or more of the issues raised above and suggest, in different ways, possible readings of this interplay between past and present.

Quoted publications:

Roland Barthes, “Les Romains au Cinéma”, in *Mythologies*, Paris, Seuil, 1982 (1957), pp. 23-25.

- Peter J. Beck, *Presenting History: Past & Present*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Pierre Beylot & Raphaëlle Moine, *Les Fictions patrimoniales sur grand et petit écran*, Bordeaux, Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2009.
- Jean-Loup Bourget, *L'histoire au cinéma : le passé retrouvé*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999.
- Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film*, Malden MA, Blackwell, 2008.
- Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001.
- James Chapman, *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Heritage Film*, London, Tauris, 2005.
- Roger Chartier, "La vérité entre fiction et histoire", in Antoine de Baecque and Christian Delage (eds.), *De l'histoire au cinéma*, Paris, Éditions Complexe, 1998, pp. 29-44.
- Pam Cook, *Fashioning the Nation: Costume and Identity in British Cinema*, London, British Film Institute, 1996.
- Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Marc Ferro, *Cinéma et histoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1993 (1977).
- Andrew Higson, "Private Lives and Public Conflicts: The English Renaissance on Film 1998-2010", in Mark Thornton Burnett and Adrian Streete (eds.), *Filming and Performing Renaissance History*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 178-192.
- Marcia Landy, *British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930-1960*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991.
- Marcia Landy (ed.), *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2001.
- Mark Moss, *Toward the Visualization of History: The Past as Image*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2008.
- Ann Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Robert A. Rosenstone, "The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in a Postliterate Age", in Marcia Landy (ed.), *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2001, pp. 50-66.
- Belén Vidal, *Heritage Film: Nation, Genre and Representation*, London, Wallflower, 2012.
- Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.
- Hayden White, "Historiography and Historiophoty", *American Historical Review* 93/5 (1988), pp. 1193-1199.
- Kevin Williams, "Flattened Visions from Timeless Machines: History in the Mass Media", in Siân Nicholas, Tom O'Malley and Kevin Williams (eds.), *Reconstructing the Past: History in the Mass Media, 1890-2005*, London, Routledge, 2008, pp. 7-28.